

**BOOK REVIEW:** *The Urban Transportation Problem* Meyer, J.R., Kain, J.F. and Wohl, M. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965.

Reviewed By Frances Frisken.\*

Although this book first appeared eight years ago, it continues to deserve the thoughtful attention of anyone concerned with urban transportation planning and policy-making. It constitutes the rigorous application of the techniques and criteria of economic analysis to arguments related to urban transportation improvements, particularly those favoring extensive investment in new and costly rail transit systems. While one can take issue with some of the authors' underlying assumptions and priorities, and can recognize that changing economic conditions will necessitate continuing reassessment and updating of their cost estimates, one must acknowledge the strength and cogency of their arguments, and agree with many of the premises on which they are based.

The authors begin by using available data on urban transportation and urban development trends to examine several prevalent assertions about the present and future role of alternative transportation modes. They conclude that the continuing trend toward urban decentralization, both of households and of businesses, is the result of a complex variety of forces. Of these, increasing automobile use has been only a relatively minor factor. While decentralization seems to occur regardless of the nature of a city's predominant transportation system it has shifted the major transportation needs in most U.S. cities away from the Central Business District to the rapidly expanding metropolitan rings and suburbs. These new needs call for different responses than those offered by the high-capacity, CBD-oriented facilities which tend to dominate the planning and delivery of urban transportation services.

The authors examine some of the prevailing assumptions about the relative costs and service levels of alternative transportation modes and conclude that transit service is not in fact the steadily worsening mess some have described; that in fact route mileage has actually increased even though vehicle miles of service have decreased. They also contend that under the existing U.S. tax structure, commuters who use centrally-located, limited access urban expressways during peak hours are the only highway users who do not appear to be paying the full costs of the facilities they use. Finally, they point out that every examination of peo-

---

\* Assistant Professor, Urban Studies Program, Division of Social Science, York University. B.A. Queen's University, Kingston, Ont. M.A., Ph.D. Case Western Reserve Univ., Cleveland, Ohio.

ples' behaviour has shown strong consumer preference for the private automobile, a preference which has become increasingly evident as rising family incomes have put automobile ownership within reach of a growing proportion of North American families.

On the basis of these findings, together with a consideration of the advantages, limitations and relative costs of several combinations of facilities, the authors evaluate alternative urban transportation systems, primarily in terms of journey-to-work requirements, and relate them to a variety of urban forms. They conclude that urban transportation systems in general should give high priority to the private automobile, not only because of its flexibility and consumer appeal, but also because highway-oriented systems are economically attractive in most cases. They find investment in rail transit to be economically justified only in cities where residential densities are high, where passenger volumes are more or less equal along routes, where downtown distribution increases as a proportion of overall trip length, wherever rail facilities already exist and do not need replacement, or where passenger-trip distances increase to a point where driving is no longer considered a "free" service. They point out that cities which meet these requirements are usually those in which rail transit facilities already exist. In most newer, low-density cities (even those which are relatively large) a highway-oriented system (incorporating express commuter bus service) is the least expensive solution. For medium density cities (those able to yield corridor demand volumes of about 10,000 or more passengers per corridor per hour) the "ideal" system will consist of line-haul bus transit on exclusive rights-of-way, with integrated, continuous bus service for residential collection and downtown distribution.

While assigning to transit facilities a limited but essential role in urban transportation, the authors prefer that government regulatory functions to assist or encourage transit operations be kept to a minimum. The policies they favour are those which they consider most likely to enhance the workings of the marketplace, and include such suggestions as pricing policies (either tolls or higher parking fees) to discourage the use of the automobile for peak hour commuting; the granting of priority access to buses on expressways; improvements in the operation, scheduling and design of transit vehicles to make their use more attractive; and elimination of market controls and government regulations on urban transit and taxi operations. They are sceptical about the desirability or effectiveness of direct subsidies to transit operations, although they maintain that the value of subsidies must be assessed largely on non-economic grounds.

Subsidy operations almost invariably embody an element of income

transfer, and evaluating the desirability of such transfers is normally considered beyond the province of economic analysis. (p.358)

Their arguments fail to show, however, that market mechanisms alone will be sufficient to reverse the steady deterioration experienced by many U.S. urban bus systems, particularly in view of the likelihood that the highway systems they advocate will encourage even more frequent and more widespread automobile use.

To what extent does a case argued exclusively on the basis of economic criteria provide useful guidance for the formation of effective public policy? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to examine the direction of urban transportation planning and policy-making since this work first appeared. One of the most significant developments has been the discontinuance of virtually all urban expressway construction in North America, a result of anti-expressway campaigns waged by various urban interests. While it is possible to dismiss political decisions to halt expressway construction as irrational capitulation to harrassment by self-interested pressure groups, such a position fails to do justice to the seriousness of many of the arguments put forth by freeway opponents. Among these have been the following:

1) The construction of expressways in urban areas invariably entails an unequal distribution of benefits and losses, sometimes to an extreme degree. Those who benefit most (suburban commuters to downtown) are seldom the same people as those most likely to suffer hardship (residents of the more densely populated inner-city and close-in suburban neighborhoods.) While land requirements for an integrated expressway system may appear to be relatively small (Meyer, Kain and Wohl put them at approximately 3% of total urban land use) the costs entailed by dislocation, neighbourhood disruption, noise and dirt are perceived as unacceptably high by those who must endure them. Generous compensation provisions have only partially alleviated this difficulty, largely because they do not address the basic issue—the reluctance of families and individuals to sacrifice to an abstract common good those aspects of life which provide the more basic forms of satisfaction—home, neighbourhood, community, a sense of place in relation to the urban complex as a whole.

2) If urban expressway plans do manage to avoid excessive takings of residential or business properties, they can still entail irreplaceable losses in the form of scarce inner city parkland or historic buildings. It is true that arguments of this nature can be found to vary greatly in credibility from place to place. Nevertheless, a decision to incur such losses is not just a decision to accept present deprivation for future advantage; it is a decision to accept future deprivation as well.

3) A highway-oriented approach to urban transportation is one which essentially dictates that there will be two classes of citizens: those who own or have access to automobiles, with all the advantages they bring, and those who do not. Even if one argues, on the basis of rising income and car ownership statistics, that economic prosperity is slowly but steadily reducing the number of autoless families, only the most sanguine of social prophets will predict a level of affluence at which every urban family can afford to own at least one car. And even the total elimination of poverty will not eliminate the transportation problems of those either too old or too young to drive, those with physical handicaps, the family members left autoless by their commuting fellows, and those who prefer not to drive at all.

4) Similar arguments can be made for highway-oriented transportation proposals intended (as those in this book are) to deal almost exclusively with the needs of commuters. Such proposals automatically imply two classes of people: those who are employed (roughly 40% of the population of urban places) and those who are not. While it can be argued, as the authors do, that the automobile is much the preferred form of transportation for social, recreational and shopping activities, it remains true that not everyone expresses that preference, and not everyone who does can exercise it. In an urban setting tailored to automobile use, such persons are condemned to relative isolation from and non-participation in most urban activities.

The issues I have raised are not entirely overlooked in the book under review. They fall within the categories of "political, aesthetic, or other purely subjective arguments" (p. 358) said by the authors to lie outside the boundaries of economic analysis. Thus, their place in the investigation is marginal. Since the book was published, however, these issues have increasingly gained ascendancy over purely economic considerations, often leaving planners and policy-makers bewildered as to how to deal with them. This book will provide them with few answers to their difficulties. In other words, by confining itself exclusively to considerations of efficiency in resource allocation, and denying any responsibility for the consequences which are likely to flow from those considerations, economic analysis severely limits its usefulness to policy-makers attempting to deal with the complexity of modern urban systems.

In retrospect, even economists may derive satisfaction from this book's failure to counteract political sensitivity to urban expressways. Recent concern about energy resource limitations, together with a painful awareness of North American vulnerability to decreases in the flow of petroleum products, have led to significant increases in fuel prices and a reap-

praisal of energy needs and priorities. This reappraisal must take account of the long-term energy implications of urban planning and development trends which encourage, or even depend on, the extravagant use of private automobiles. At the very least, these developments necessitate a recalculation of the relative direct costs of the various urban transportation alternatives. It may turn out that the policies which best satisfied the criteria of economic efficiency in the mid-1960s will appear considerably less efficient by the mid-1970s.

I have taken issue with some of this book's recommendations on the ground that they constitute too narrow and too restrictive an approach to a complex public policy area. Nonetheless, the book remains an important one, if only because of its insistence that new urban transportation developments, if they are to make a meaningful contribution to urban life, must reflect a realistic understanding of prevailing urban trends. At a time when most urban activities are steadily decentralizing, the need for high-capacity, downtown-oriented transportation facilities is just as steadily diminishing. Nevertheless, as urban transportation planners are turning their attention to transit alternatives to beleaguered or abandoned expressways, they are tending to concentrate primarily on high-capacity, core-oriented rail facilities, to the exclusion of other needs. Construction of these facilities depends heavily on funding from higher level governments, funding which constitutes, in effect, a massive subsidy to the dwindling ranks of downtown commuters. In the meantime, antiquated bus systems in many U.S. urban centres stagger at the brink of collapse. Some survive only by virtue of last minute crisis funding from government. That funding is usually only sufficient to keep them in operation, and does nothing to help them restore run-down equipment, let alone attract and train more imaginative management personnel, undertake long range assessment of route and service improvements, or experiment with innovations to attract and keep new users. Their captive clientele—the so-called “transit-dependent population”—reaps few or none of the benefits of the new enthusiasm for transit.

What is needed at this point in time is a study which takes up where these authors left off, acknowledges the prevalence and likely persistence of social and political objections to urban highways, and examines the costs and benefits, both economic and social, of alternative ways of employing the funds now becoming available for investment in urban transit.